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STATE FOR EUR/CARC, EUR/FO AND DRL

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SUBJECT: OPPOSITION PARTIES QUICK TO PRE-JUDGE ELECTIONS

Classified By: Ambassador John F. Tefft, reason 1.4(b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: The government is concerned that the opposition will not accept any outcome of the January 5 elections that returns former President Mikheil Saakashvili to office, and that the opposition will take to the streets again on January 6. The ruling National Movement's polls suggest Saakashvili may win in the first round of the election. However, opposition candidates insist Saakashvili has no chance to win at all, and any win will have to be the result of unfair tactics and intimidation of voters. They allege intimidation and other tactics on the part of the National Movement that they believe will make a fair election impossible. Difficulties in arranging independent interim polling and exit polling may make it even harder for the parties to accept an outcome that differs from their previously conceived expectations. The government is welcoming hundreds of election monitors as its best chance to demonstrate the election is actually free and fair. We are reminding both sides of the importance of abiding by the outcome of elections that are judged free and fair by ODIHR and other election monitors. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Acting President Burjanadze has expressed publicly and also privately to the Ambassador her concern that the opposition is already laying the groundwork to contest the legitimacy of any election in which Saakashvili is the winner. Both Burjanadze and Saakashvili have pledged that the January 5 presidential election will be free and fair, and that all candidates will have an equal chance to campaign. In separate meetings with the Ambassador on December 4 both Burjanadze and National Movement MP Giga Bokeria complained that the opposition is trying to create a "climate of fraud" for the local and international community, by repeating the idea over and over and emphasizing every report of intimidation or pressure.

¶3. (C) A recent poll conducted by BCG, a company run by Central Election Commission Chairman Levan Tarkhnishvili's wife, Ani Tarkhnishvili, interviewed 10,000 people and found 71 percent would vote in the elections and 54 percent would vote for Saakashvili. Bokeria insists the poll is accurate, in spite of suspicions raised by the opposition about the relationship between its owner, the CEC and the National Movement. They say that opposition candidates do not have serious support or organizations outside Tbilisi, except in Adjara. Saakashvili is weakest in Adjara and Tbilisi, but he enjoys substantial support in Imereti and Samegrelo, according to the National Movement. Overall, says Bokeria, Saakashvili has enough support to achieve a first round victory on January 5.

¶4. (C) In early televised interviews, united opposition presidential candidate Levan Gachechiladze has been argumentative with reporters and raised perceptions that he is not presidential, possibly costing him votes in an election where the key issue is the candidates' perceived

ability to rule this very fractious country. At the same time, he is saying that Saakashvili has no chance of winning.

There have been some unscientific polls, such as one published by the newspaper Kviris Palitra based on its readership's vote, that show Gachechiladze in a dead heat with Saakashvili. Otherwise Gachechiladze and the other candidates have not revealed any professional polling results that would support claims that they are close to defeating Saakashvili. Other candidates are no less shy about predicting the election outcome. Davit Gamkrelidze of the New Rightists party said in an interview on December 4 that "Saakashvili is already defeated". Kakha Kukava of the Conservative Party is quoted as saying that if Gachechiladze does not win, the opposition will prove the illegitimacy of President Saakashvili to the whole world. Presidential candidate Gia Maisashvili has openly called for civil disobedience after January 5 if Saakashvili wins, as have members of the Equality Institute, an NGO associated with the united opposition.

15. (C) For their part, opposition politicians are sure the government is stacking the deck against them and they complain of an atmosphere of intimidation. There have been allegations of attacks on opposition activists and headquarters in Tskaltubo, Batumi and elsewhere. The National Movement has been accused of using government pressure to extort campaign contributions and expressions of support, and of collecting ID cards to create votes. Acting President Burjanadze and National Movement Secretary General, David Kirkitadze, have attributed these reports to actions by overzealous party operatives and pledged to curb such behavior. The opposition objects to Saakashvili's use of cars, airplanes and other state "administrative resources" in the course of his campaigning, to which they naturally do not

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have equal access. Saakashvili's National Movement spokesman claims they are paying for those state resources. The government is also taking steps that are only in its power to gain voters' favor, such as a temporary employment program that is touted to provide up to 100,000 jobs.

16. (C) Imedi remains closed at this time, but will soon re-open. Equal time rules are about to go into effect, when the qualified candidates are confirmed by the CEC on December 16. According to the Embassy's news watchers, opposition candidates are already well represented on television news programs. Pro-Saakashvili advertisements are beginning to be seen, and this is an area where the incumbent's well-heeled campaign may have a significant advantage. In Tbilisi, one station that clearly supports the opposition, Kavkasia, is operating, and when Imedi comes back on the air, its coverage will inevitably extend an anti-Saakashvili message across Georgia. Both the Georgian Media Council and independent observation by Adam Michnik (the latter specifically invited because of the Imedi situation) are in place to help ensure that media excesses are exposed in a timely manner.

17. (C) The government has backed up its promise that elections will be free and fair by inviting the international community to send as many election monitors as it can muster to observe the polls on January 5 and the election campaign beforehand. A large number of trained election monitors will give some assurance of fairness and deter election-day shenanigans. A parallel vote count is planned. However, it is hard to say how accurate either side's current predictions of the election outcome may be or what the impact of any intimidation or other pre-election unfairness may be. We are pointedly reminding all the parties that they must abide by the outcome of elections that are found to be free and fair by impartial election observers.

TEFFT